Theme 1: Interaction Between Humans and the Environment (ENV)

The interaction between humans and the environment is a fundamental theme in world history, as the environment shaped human societies, but, increasingly, human societies also affected the environment.

During prehistory, humans interacted with the environment as hunters, fishers, and foragers, and human migrations led to the peopling of the earth. As the Neolithic Revolution began, humans affected their environments more directly, either as farmers or pastoralists. Environmental factors such as rainfall patterns, climate, and available flora and fauna shaped human interactions in different regions. Human impact on the environment intensified as populations grew and as people migrated into new regions. As people migrated to cities or established trade networks, new diseases emerged and spread, sometimes devastating an entire region. Beginning with the Industrial Revolution, human effects on the environment increased with the development of more sophisticated technologies, the utilization of new energy sources, and a rapid increase in human populations.

Theme 2: Development and Interaction of Cultures (CUL)

This theme explores the origins, uses, dissemination, and adaptation of ideas, beliefs, and knowledge within and between societies and how the processes of adopting or adapting new belief and knowledge systems are complex and often lead to syncretic cultural forms and practices.

Studying the dominant belief system(s) or religions, philosophical interests, and technical and artistic approaches can reveal how major groups in society view themselves and others, and how they respond to multiple challenges. When people of different societies interact, they often share components of their cultures, deliberately or not. A society’s culture may be investigated and compared with other societies’ cultures as a way to reveal both what is unique to a culture and what it shares with other cultures. It is also possible to analyze, compare, and trace particular cultural trends or ideas across human societies and over time.

Theme 3: State Building, Expansion, and Conflict (SB)

This theme explores how hierarchical systems of rule have been constructed and maintained over time and the impact of these processes.

This theme encourages the comparative study of different state forms (e.g., kingdoms, empires, nation-states) across time and place and the interactions among them. Continuity and change are also embedded in this theme through attention to the organizational and cultural foundations of long-term stability as well as the internal and external causes of conflict. The theme leads to an examination and comparison of various forms of state development and expansion in the context of various productive strategies (e.g., agrarian, pastoral, mercantile), various cultural and ideological foundations (e.g., religions, philosophies, ideas of nationalism), various social and gender structures, and in different environmental contexts. This theme also includes different types of states, such as autocracies and constitutional democracies. Finally, in this theme students explore interstate relations, including warfare, diplomacy, commercial and cultural exchange, and the formation of international organizations.

Theme 4: Creation, Expansion, and Interaction of Economic Systems (ECON)

This theme surveys the diverse patterns and systems that human societies have developed to produce, distribute, and consume desired goods and services across time and place. It explores how these interactions influence cultural and technological diffusion, migration, state formation, social classes, and human interaction with the environment.

This theme analyzes and compares major transitions in human economic activity, such as the growth and spread of agricultural, pastoral, and industrial production; the development of various labor systems associated with these economic systems (including different forms of household management and the use of coerced or free labor); and the ideologies, values, and institutions (such as capitalism and socialism) that sustained them. This theme also calls attention to patterns of trade and commerce between various societies, with particular attention paid to the relationship between regional and global networks of communication and exchange, and their effects on economic growth and decline. These webs of interaction strongly influence cultural and technological diffusion, migration, state formation, social classes, and human interaction with the environment.

Theme 5: Development and Transformation of Social Structures (SOC)

This theme is about relations among human beings, how human societies develop ways of grouping their members, and norms that govern interactions between individuals and social groups. Additionally, this theme explores the processes through which social categories, roles, and practices are created, maintained, and transformed.

Social stratification comprises distinctions based on kinship systems, ethnic associations, and hierarchies of gender, race, wealth, and class. The study of world history includes thoughtful consideration of the way that social hierarchies developed and changed over time and the various factors that contributed to these changes. It also involves analysis of the connections between changes in social structures and other historical shifts, especially trends in political economy, cultural expression, and human interaction with the environment.